

Proper 28B 2018 Sermon

Mark 13:1-8

As Jesus came out of the temple, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” Then Jesus asked him, “Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.”

When he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter, James, John, and Andrew asked him privately, “Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign that all these things are about to be accomplished?” Then Jesus began to say to them, “Beware that no one leads you astray. Many will come in my name and say, ‘I am he!’ and they will lead many astray. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, do not be alarmed; this must take place, but the end is still to come. For nation will rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom; there will be earthquakes in various places; there will be famines. This is but the beginning of the birthpangs.”

“Look, Teacher, what large stones and what large buildings!” the disciple remarked. “Then Jesus asked him, ‘Do you see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left here upon another; all will be thrown down.’” Scholars tell us that it had taken 10,000 men ten years just to build the retaining walls around the Temple Mount, the huge platform on which the Jewish Temple was built. Even today, the Temple Mount in Jerusalem is the largest man-made platform in the world, taking up the space of 24 football fields. Regarding the Temple itself, 1st-Century historian Josephus wrote: “Viewed from without, the [Temple] had everything that could amaze either mind or eyes. Overlaid all round with stout plates of gold, the first rays of the sun reflected so fierce a blaze of fire that those who endeavored to look at it were forced to turn away as if they had looked straight at the sun...”¹

But in the year A.D. 70, around the time that Mark was writing his Gospel, the Romans utterly destroyed the Temple and crushed a Jewish revolt. Today, not one stone is left of Herod’s magnificent Temple.

In the last part of the 20th Century, a more modern building ranked, for almost 25 years, as the world’s tallest building. Completed in 1973, it was home to the world’s largest retailer, for whom the building was named.

But today, that building is no longer the world’s tallest building; nor does it bear the name of the retail company that built it. In fact, just last month, that retail company, once the largest in the world, filed for bankruptcy. No one could ever have *imagined* such a fate when the Sears Tower was built.²

On September 11, 2001, two planes flew into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, which were, at the time, the second and third highest buildings in the United States, behind the Sears Tower (now called the Willis Tower). On 9/11

the unimaginable became all too real. Almost 3,000 people were killed. Air traffic came to a halt. The stock market plunged, businesses failed, and Americans felt vulnerable as never before in modern history. If ever it could be said that we experienced apocalyptic times, similar in impact (though not in details) to the apocalyptic events described in the 13th chapter of Mark's Gospel, it was in September of 2001.

We could mention other events in our relatively recent lives that shook the foundations beneath us. On a Global scale, there were wars being fought; there was the AIDS epidemic of the early 1980's and the Y2K computer scare near the end of the millennium. In the United States, there were the bankruptcies of Lehman Brothers and General Motors and the government bailouts of financial institutions during the Great Recession – actions which had been unimaginable just a decade before.

But there are also more *personal* events that can shake our lives to their foundations: the sudden death of a family member; a divorce; the loss of a home to flooding or fire; the sudden loss of a job – you can likely name several events in your own life when the foundation shook beneath you.

At such times, one thing becomes very clear: Those passing things in which we have placed our trust, or in which we have invested a great deal of our energy, even our identity, no longer seem so important or consequential. Squabbling between Democrats and Republicans came almost to a complete halt in the days following 9/11. We were no longer members of this or that political party; we were Americans. We were fellow human beings.

The question we must ask is: Why does this fade over time? Why didn't the intense sense of unity amongst us following 9/11 persist? Why did we fall back into divisiveness and partisanship?

After the Presidential election of 1952, Adlai Stevenson, the loser of that election, said in his concession speech: "It is traditionally American to fight hard before an election. It is equally traditional to close ranks as soon as the people have spoken. That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties. I urge you all to give to Gen. Eisenhower the support he will need to carry out the great tasks that lie before him. I pledge him [my support]. We vote as many. But we pray as one."

"That which unites us as American citizens is far greater than that which divides us as political parties." In principle, yes; but why does it seem that it is only after tragedies such as 9/11 that we **act** like we *believe* this?

Fr. John Shea offers some insight into a human dynamic that is in play during times when the ground seems to have been pulled out from under us. He says that times like 9/11, when our foundations are shaken, are like the times when "the

trapeze artist has let go of one bar and has not yet grabbed the next bar. It is midair living. The identity we had is gone and the identity we *will* have has not arrived... [S]piritual teachers suggest that the in-between time is an opportunity to remember that we are always more than what is happening to us. We are not only *immersed* in transition, we **transcend** it. Our soul is not only related to the changing temporal order but to the **unchanging** *eternal* order.”³ Is that similar to what Adlai Stevenson was saying when he said, “We vote as many. But we pray as one.”?

Yes, we *are* related to the changing temporal order, to all those events that happen to us each day. But we are also, and more *profoundly*, related to the **unchanging** *eternal* order – to God, and, through the flow of the Holy Spirit and the indwelling presence of Christ, we are *fundamentally* related to each other, with spiritual ties far more profound than political ties. During times like 9/11, when we have lost our grip on one bar and have yet to grasp another – during times when we live in midair – we seem to *sense* that elemental spiritual reality and connection more keenly and acutely.

“When we lead a stable life...,” Fr. Shea writes, “this spiritual truth often eludes us. When disruption occurs—and we either choose or are forced to change—an invitation emerges in the middle of the transition. Since we are between earthly stabilities, we may just shift awareness to our **heavenly** connection. In doing this, we begin to develop our spiritual potential.

“...Divine reality is *always* supplying a place to stand. However, we most **need** this divine grounding when we have lost our human grounding, when we are in the midair between the bars.

“The underlying idea is to understand ourselves as a hierarchy of different aspects and to disidentify with the real but *lower* aspects. In doing this, we will coincide with the **higher** reality of our transcendent self...

“For those of us addicted to our descriptive selves [I am my profession, I am my nationality, I am my political party, etc.], moving to the *transcendent* self seems like a fallback position. When we cannot have what we *really* want, we reluctantly stand on the ground God provides in the turmoil of sea change. But once we have negotiated a new set of earthly stabilities, we quickly forget the sense of transcendence that sustained us in the midst of change.

“...We remember the spiritual when we need it and we forget it when we don’t.”
[Repeat]

My friends, this is why we need to practice some regular form of “detachment” from our “descriptive selves” – detachment from “I am a priest, I am an American, I am an Episcopalian, I am a member of this political party,” etc. Such detachment puts us, at least for the moment, in that midair space; or even, at

times, on the ground God provides. Some form of regular prayer or spiritual practice can put us in that midair space without having some tragedy force us there.

This past week, there was a prominent piece of news regarding the richest person in the world. Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon, was reported to have said to his staff, “Amazon is not too big to fail ... In fact, I predict one day Amazon *will* fail. Amazon will go bankrupt. If you look at large companies, their lifespans tend to be 30-plus years, not a hundred-plus years.”

Bezos founded Amazon in 1994; the company will be 30 years old in just 6 years. At that time, Bezos will still be only 60 years old – which means that, by his own reckoning, it is quite possible that Amazon will fail while he is still CEO.

And then it just might be that the richest person in the world will find himself in midair.

AMEN

1 *The Jewish War*, p. 304

2 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_tallest_buildings_in_the_United_States

3 Quotes from John Shea are from John Shea, *Eating with the Bridegroom*, Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005, pp. 270-274